DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 714 PS 024 348

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TITLE	Helping Early Childhood Teacher Education Students Learn about the Internet. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Education, Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-PS-96-5
PUB DATE	May 96
CONTRACT	RR93002007
NOTE	3p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Early Childhood Education; *Education Majors; Electronic Mail; Information Services; Internet; *Learning Activities; Lesson Plans; *Teacher Education; Teacher Educators; *World Wide Web
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; Gopher; *Listserv Discussion Groups; Listservs

ABSTRACT

This digest provides examples of projects which can be used in the early childhood education (ECE) and child development classrooms to introduce students to Internet resources. The first section of the digest suggests guides that teacher educators can use to design Internet training sessions and to locate resources of interest to adults working with young children. The second section lists several electronic discussion groups (EDGs), or listservs, related to early childhood education and suggests five activities involving discussion groups that students can undertake. First, students need to learn about Internet etiquette. Second, they can monitor the interactions on a single EDG. Third, they can pose questions on specific topics to an EDG. Fourth, they can respond to a question posted to an EDG by a group member after adequately researching the topic. Finally, they can summarize the activity of an EDG by reading messages posted to the EDG's archive. The third section of the digest briefly describes the World Wide Web (WWW) and Gopher resources and outlines four student projects that involve using the WWW. Students can try the following activities: (1) create an information packet consisting of resources they have found on the WWW; (2) search for lesson plans using WWW search engines; (3) solve particular problems they have observed in early childhood settings by searching the ERIC database on the WWW and gathering other relevant resources on the WWW; and (4) be information providers by creating a website containing resources on a particular topic or representing a particular organization such as a local child care center. By integrating Internet use into early childhood teacher education programs through activities such as these, early childhood teacher educators enhance the educational experiences of their students and prepare them to be active participants in the early childhood community. (BC)

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ERIC DIGEST
May 1996 • EDO-PS-96-5

ED 395 714

Helping Early Childhood Teacher Education Students Learn about the Internet

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Teacher educators in the early childhood education (ECE) and child development fields can use the technological capacities of the Internet to expand the boundaries of the classroom and enrich the learning experiences of their students. The Internet is a vast system of computer networks that exchange electronic data, thereby facilitating communication and access to information. Many teacher educators are aware of the potential of the Internet but are not certain how to integrate the Internet into early childhood teacher education. This digest provides examples of projects which could be used in a child development classroom to introduce students to Internet resources. The URLs ("uniform resource locators," or Internet addresses, of websites or Gophers) cited in boldface numbered items are listed in the Electronic References section at the end of the digest.

Getting Started

A connection to the Internet and a willingness to learn are the foundation for integrating the Internet into an ECE classroom; however, a few other resources will help. Students must receive training in how to use the Internet. Texts by Kovacs (1995) and Jaffe (1994) can help teacher educators design appropriate training sessions. A guide published by ERIC/EECE (1995) provides specific information about using the Internet and describes Internet resources of interest to adults working with young children. Teacher educators can also use materials made available via the Internet by other Internet trainers, such as can be found in the searchable index at **Yahoo!**, titled **Computers and Internet (11).**

Using Electronic Discussion Groups

Electronic discussion groups, or mailing lists, provide opportunities for people to have conversations about topics of mutual interest via electronic mail (email). **Liszt (8)** is a searchable directory of discussion groups which includes directions for subscribing. Examples of discussion groups related to ECE are ECENET-L and ECEOL-L (on ECE in general), SAC-L (on school-age child care), REGGIO-L (on the preschool approach used in Reggio Emilia, Italy), and CYE-L (on appropriate environments for young children).

There are no membership charges for subscribing to a discussion group; however, in order to participate in them, students need email accounts. Email accounts are available from many teaching institutions, community computing networks (such as Free-Nets), or commercial Internet providers. It is important for instructors to provide training in email use rather than assume students will learn to use email on their own. The technical details of using email vary from system to system; the local network administrator can usually provide assistance. Once students have access to email and discussion groups, they can undertake the following activities.

Learn about email etiquette. Students will need to understand Internet etiquette, or "netiquette." For example, explain that students should "lurk"—read the discussions and observe the tone of the group—before posting. Discuss netiquette in class, and develop a list of guidelines that will be used in their interactions with discussion groups. Additional netiquette tips are offered by **Rinaldi (10).**

Focus on a single discussion group. The number of messages posted to and topics discussed on a single discussion group can be overwhelming. Students new to discussion groups are likely to become frustrated if they try to keep up with all messages on several lists. Divide the students into groups and assign each student group a particular discussion group to monitor. Every month have each student group summarize the major or most useful interactions on its discussion group for others in the class. These summaries can be presented orally during class time or distributed by email. By sharing summaries, students can learn how professionals share information with one another and at the same time determine which discussion groups are most relevant to their own personal interests.

Ask the experts. Many people who belong to ECE discussion groups are practitioners working with young children who are often willing to provide information on good practice. Their expertise is a valuable resource for students. Select a discussion group related to the topic of the course research paper and have students join the group. In addition to using published resources, students can solicit input from practitioners in ECE about their topic. Explain to students that specific questions which show previous research and careful thought are more likely to generate useful responses from discussion group members. For example, rather than asking "How do you mainstream children?" students might construct a specific request for information: "I am trying to identify techniques to use in mainstreaming a six-year-old boy with Downs Syndrome into a session of science experiments with water. I have considered working with students in small groups rather than as a whole class. What would you recommend doing so that he can participate fully without disrupting the experiments?" Preview students' questions

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before they send them to the discussion group. If possible, confirm with the owner of the discussion group that the requests will not be disruptive. Avoid having several students ask the same question of the same group.

Be the expert. Many requests for information are posted daily to discussion groups. Assign students to select a question that interests them and then research and write a response. Preview responses before students send them. Responses should include references to the information resources that were consulted as well as an explanation that the response is part of a course requirement, so that the original requester will not expect such researched responses to every question.

Summarize the conversation. A copy of each message sent to various education-related discussion groups is archived in the **AskERIC Virtual Library Education Listserv Archives (2)**. Each discussion group has its own chronologically arranged archive. Students might browse discussion group archives for topics which generated more than ten messages and can write a summary of the discussion and points of consensus that emerged. For example, students could summarize the **January 1995 ECENET-L (3)** discussion about Power Rangers. These summaries can be distributed to class members or reviewed by the teacher educator.

Using World Wide Web and Gopher Resources

The World Wide Web and Gophers are depositories of publicly accessible information that can be used to supplement course textbooks or readings. The Web is a hypermedia environment consisting of text, graphics, audio, and video. Gophers are menu-based resources of text files. Web and Gopher sites, such as **ERIC/EECE's Web site (5)**, can be accessed using Web browser software that is graphical (such as Netscape) or text-based (such as Lynx); gophers can also be accessed using gopher software. The local network administrator can provide information about the availability and use of this software. Using the World Wide Web and Gophers, students can try the following activities.

Create an information packet. Parents and guardians are important partners in educating young children and often request information from early childhood educators. Have students create a parent information packet on topics of their choosing using full-text resources from, for example, **ERIC/EECE's Web site (5)**, the **National Parent Information Network (NPIN) (9)**, and other **ERIC system Web sites (6)**. Possible topics include kindergarten readiness, children and the mass media, sibling interactions, and discipline.

Search for lesson plans. Students developing lesson plans on particular topics can search the Web for examples. Two possible "search engines" to use are **Infoseek (7)** and **Alta Vista (1)**; a more complete list is available in the searchable index in **Yahoo!**, titled **Computers and Internet...Searching the Web (12)**. No search engine available can do a comprehensive search of all web sites. Most search engines allow keyword searching, but the level of search sophistication varies from one search engine to another. In general, using the phrase "lesson plans" and a keyword describing the topic area will retrieve good search results. For example, to look for lesson plans for a science unit on flowers, use the keywords "lesson plans" and "flowers."

Solve a problem. Many ECE programs require students to observe children and staff interacting in an ECE setting such as a preschool. Instruct students to keep a record of the problems that they see when they are observing. When the students return from observing, divide them into groups and have each group search the **ERIC database (4)** and use ERIC/EECE and other Internet resources to research possible solutions to one of the problems observed. As a group, the students could discuss the possible solutions, select their preferred solution, and present the problem and solution to the entire class. If appropriate, the proposed solution could also be presented to the staff working in the ECE setting.

Be an information provider. In addition to using the information posted by other people, students can be involved in projects to provide information via the Web. To create a website, students will need access to a Web server (available in many postsecondary settings) and knowledge of HTML (hypertext markup language, the formatting language for creating web pages). A class of students could create a web site for their class or work with a local or campus child care center to create a web site for the center.

Conclusion

The Internet is a vast community of people and resources. By integrating Internet use into early childhood teacher education programs, early childhood teacher educators enhance the educational experiences of their students and prepare them to be active participants in the global ECE community.

For More Information

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education (ERIC/EECE). (1995). *A to Z: The Early Childhood Educator's Guide to the Internet.* (1995). Urbana, IL: Author.

Kovacs, D. (1995). *The Internet Trainer's Guide.* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Jaffe, L.D. (1994). *Introducing the Internet: A Trainer's Workshop.* Berkeley: Library Solutions Press.

Electronic References

These URLs are in the format typically used with a Web browser. Type the URL in the "File-Location" (or "Document URL," etc.) selection box of the web browser.

1. **Alta Vista** — http://www.altavista.digital.com
2. **AskERIC Listsrv Archives** — http://ericir.syr.edu/Virtual/Listserv_Archives
3. **ECENET-L Archives** — http://ericir.syr.edu/Virtual/Listserv_Archives/ecenet-l.html
4. **ERIC db** — http://www.cua.edu/www/eric_ae/search.html
5. **ERIC/EECE** — http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/ericeece.html
6. **ERIC System** — http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/eece/ericlink.html
7. **Infoseek** — http://www.infoseek.com
8. **Liszt** — http://www.liszt.com
9. **NPIN** — http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/npin/npinhome.html
10. **Rinaldi** — http://www.fau.edu/rinaldi/net/index.html
11. **Yahoo! Computers and Internet** — http://www.yahoo.com/text/Computers_and_Internet/index.html
12. **Yahoo! Computers...Searching the Web** — http://www.yahoo.com/Computers_and_Internet/Internet/World_Wide_Web/Searching_the_Web/

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